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Shooting the Great War

Albert Dawson and The American Correspondent Film Company, 1914–1918

by Ron van Dopperen

Abstract In the early days of World War I, a secret film campaign was brought to the United States. In an effort to control public opinion in this important neutral country, German officials set up The American Correspondent Film Company. As a front man in this organization, Albert K. Dawson, an American news cameraman, was sent to Berlin. Dawson's camera covered the troops all the way from Flanders' mud to the gates of Przemysl, Poland, but he suffered professionally following the collapse of the American Correspondent Film Company. This article is a short study into the risks and perils of film propaganda.

For many Americans, World War I was a story of disillusionment. High ideals were never sufficient to explain the nation's entry into the war, and while victory may have been theirs, innocence was lost forever. Instead of a world made safe for democracy, they witnessed the threatening rise of fascism. As with the Depression, memories of the Great War grew increasingly dark and sinister, and the American people began to consider themselves victims of wartime propaganda and financial entanglements. So, too, were the experiences of Albert K. Dawson.

When he was still at high school, Dawson's hometown newspaper expected him to become an expert photographer. His firm was later described by the *Stamford Daily Advocate* as "known throughout this and other countries for its enterprises in photographing events."[1] Not to be outdone, *Variety* qualified him as one of the most active and daring cameramen in World War I.

Albert Dawson was born in Vincennes, Indiana, around 1885. His father, Thomas, was a Civil War veteran who had been with Sherman during the burning of Atlanta. Later, he made his way up as a contractor and bank officer and earned a local reputation for his work in the city council. Despite a meager education, Thomas Dawson had a very inquiring and intellectual nature. A well-read man, he visited Canada, the Gulf of Mexico, and many Civil War conventions. The same enterprising attitude could also be found in his oldest son, Albert. As one of his relatives wrote to me, "He was a free soul—he seems to have had an artistic temperament, a certain restlessness of life."[2]

Young Albert had his first experience with the camera before graduating from Lincoln High School. He soon became quite fascinated with photography. Although at the time he was still living with his parents, business was already booming. The *Vincennes Capital* reported in 1903: "He has no studio, but makes a specialty of outdoor scenes, etc., and during the school year he is unable to keep up with orders."[3] After some local jobs for the press, Dawson started working freelance for Underwood & Underwood. His news pictures were now sold all over the country.

In 1913, Dawson moved to Stamford, Connecticut. Together with his partner J. Edward Brown, he opened his

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own studio, which specialized in commercial photography, specifically catalog illustrations, advertisements, and the like. Brown and Dawson used Stamford's convenient location on Long Island Sound for a remarkable series of scoops. According to Francis Collins in his book, *The Camera Man,* Albert Dawson was the first American to realize the commercial possibilities of aerial photography. These early pictures were all made above the north shore of Long Island Sound and proved to be quite effective in advertising real estate.[4]

Travel agencies were among Dawson's best customers. His pictures of exotic locations abroad were not only taken to advertise the travel companies he worked for, but were also sold to the press as news photos. One of the most promising assignments was given to Dawson by Matthew B. Claussen, publicity manager of the Hamburg-America Line. In May 1914, Dawson photographed the maiden trip of the Vaterland, one of the largest ships afloat at that time. "Keep an eye on the news and if she sinks, set my name up with big black border," he wrote.[5] As we know now, a follow-up of the Titanic disaster did not occur. But the voyage did provide Dawson with the necessary connections to start his career as a combat photographer.

A few months later, admist flag waving and cheers, the Great War broke out. In the United States, however, many German Americans were at a complete loss. Great Britain, with a keen eye for the need of publicity, had cut all transatlantic cables leading to Germany. As a result, most of the war news had to go through Allied wireless stations. In September 1914, Matthew Claussen was employed by the German government to counteract this move. He organized what was called The German Information Service. Its initial purpose was to furnish a sheet of pro-German articles to all American newspapers, free of charge, each day. The free news did not get enough circulation, however. At a meeting in New York City it was decided that more reliable stories had to be secured from American correspondents working in Europe. Edward Lyell Fox, a writer for *The Wildman Magazine,* was finally picked for the job. Claussen, who had not forgotten his work for the Hamburg-America Line, also contacted Albert Dawson. Their assignment would be to gather first-hand information, including pictures and films, about the war in Europe.

On 19 November 1914, Fox and Dawson left for Copenhagen. Because of the political implications, Dawson was very anxious not to bind himself to an exclusive contract. His pictures would be sold on a free-lance basis, mostly through Underwood & Underwood. He did have however—as he told the press—a great desire to learn the facts from the German side of the war. Having received letters of recommendation from Count von Bernstorff, the Germany ambassador, he wanted to get as near to the front as possible. "Wish me all the luck," he wrote, "as I perhaps will need all I can get."[6]

With the help of a courier, the Americans were safely brought to Europe. Their first destination, Christiana, Denmark, was a neutral harbor, and the British navy did not bother to search the ship. From Denmark they crossed the mine-strewn Baltic Sea to Warnemunde, Germany. Dawson and Fox slipped quietly through the back door of the German Empire. On arrival in Berlin, they made their applications at the foreign office. Their request to go to the front, however, was met with a long, evasive reply. As a rule, no foreign photographers were allowed to accompany the German army. It took a lot of pressure from home to change these conditions. After a delay of nearly one month, Matthew Claussen sent a telegram mentioning his plan for a film campaign in the United States: "Repeat urgently earlier suggestion about photographer Dawson and war correspondent Fox. It would be most undesirable if both should leave without accomplishing anything. Moving pictures by Dawson, with Fox's cooperation, in which, if possible, correspondents themselves appear, urgently desired. Costs would be covered by big newspapers here."[7]

The German government now finally agreed to prepare their journey to the Western Front. In the meantime, Dawson had gone to General von Löwenfeld, the commandant of Berlin, and from him he secured permission to take photos in the prison camp at Zossen. Pictures were made of what appeared to be excellent living conditions in the camp: prisoners drinking beer in the canteen, a barber shop advertising the latest "Parisian haircut," a soldier making flowers for the chapel altar. The French-Moroccan soldiers, some of them still wearing their red fez, immediately drew Dawson's attention. A big, rather savage looking Moroccan and a neat French officer were selected for his camera. Nicely posed, they made a splendid picture. Without knowing it, they also seemed to ridicule the so-called Alliance against Germany.[8]

Back in Berlin, the general staff had also given its authorization to Claussen's film plan. The Americans were introduced to an experienced cameraman, Theyer, who had made a film on Jack London's trip to the South Sea islands. Theyer was instructed to go along with Dawson and make a movie of the Western Front.

First Lieutenant Herrmann, an officer from the Africa Corps, accompanied the cameramen on their way to France. Arriving by train in Charleville, they first contacted military headquarters to see which places were to be visited. The Germans apparently wanted to go by the book—and they were the ones who wrote the script. The next day, Dawson and Theyer were escorted to Lille. They shot their first film at the station hall that had been destroyed by a French bomb. Again, the photographers got

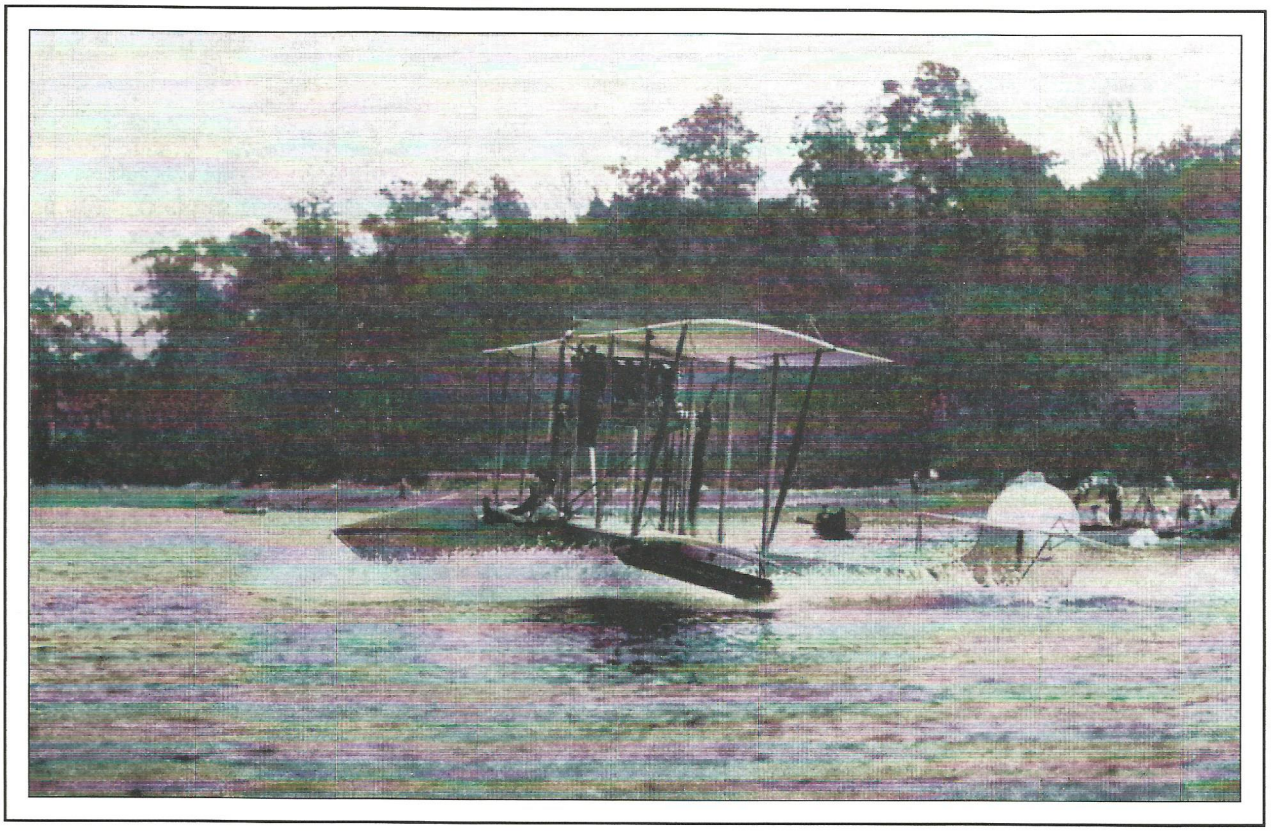

Figure 1. Albert Dawson taking off from Long Island Sound to photograph aerial moving pictures of real estate properties. From Francis A. Collins The Camera Man *(New York: Century, 1919).*

caught up with regulations. A military policeman who had been watching their work with unmistakable distrust would have arrested them if it had not been for their escort. Once Dawson had reached the trenches, he found out that—apart from military watchdogs—there was an even greater danger to his work. He probably received his first taste of real war somewhere in the front lines near Arras. According to a newspaper report, Dawson's camera was wrecked as he was trying to capture a picture of combat. "A shell came his way, and the next thing he knew he was spattered with mud and glad to get off uninjured."[9]

Altogether, Dawson and Theyer shot about 2500 feet of film on their trip along the Western Front. It was, in fact, the first official German war movie to be used for exhibition in the United States. In March 1915, the original negatives were sent to New York together with instructions from Arthur Zimmerman, the secretary of foreign affairs. According to the German government, these films were only part of a plan to establish permanent operations for picture propaganda in America. One month later, on 12 April 1915, this idea was put into operation by Matthew Claussen when he incorporated The American Correspondent Film Company.

It was an important step both for the Germans and for Dawson. Through his partner J. E. Brown, Albert decided to reserve 20% of the shares in this new firm. Business prospects were looking good; Dr. Fuehr, secretary of The American Correspondent Film Company, had paid in an extra $80,000. Dawson may not have realized that Fuehr, who had been directing the finances of the German Information Service, was not in the film business for the money. As Fuehr wrote in a letter to Berlin: "The interest of the Imperial Government in this undertaking consists in the fact that the company should not work for the greatest possible financial profit from the disposal of the war films, but lay in the chief emphasis on the greatest possible circulation of them."[10] For public relations reasons, Albert Dawson would now be presented as a front man of their organization. He was, after all, a neutral American correspondent.

From its inception, the German film effort was troubled

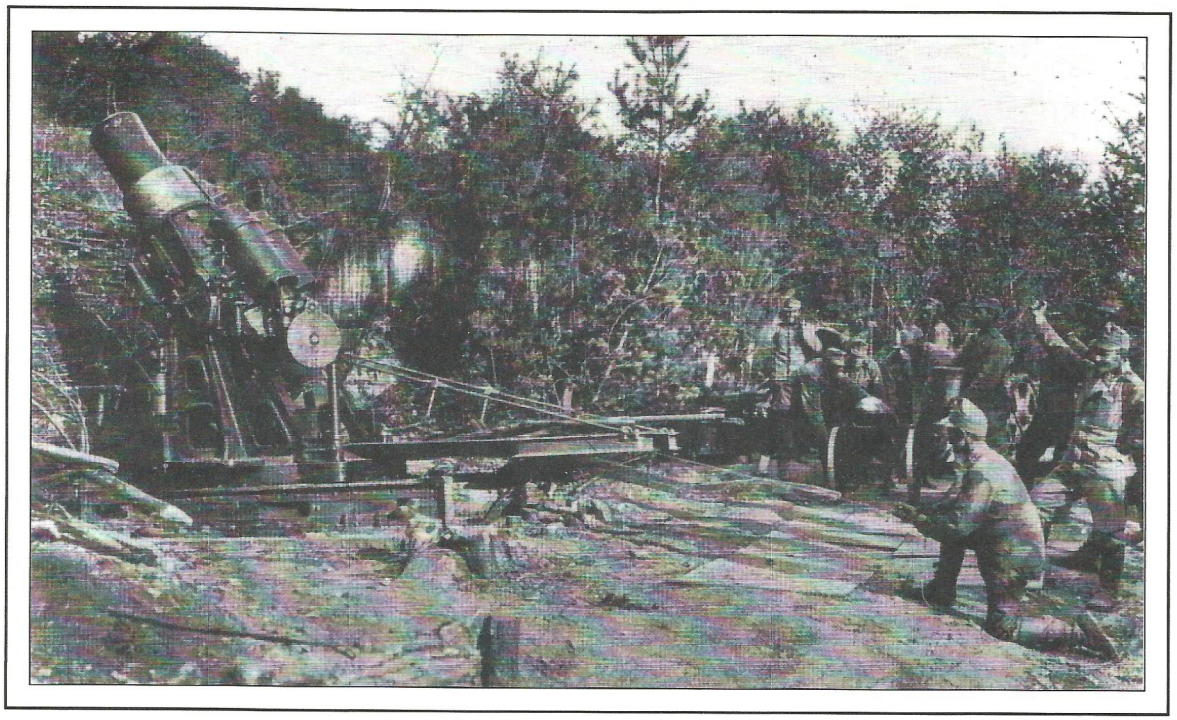

Figure 2. Austrian 30.5 Skoda mortar in action. Photograph by Albert Dawson.

by a shortage of authentic war pictures. The early films taken by Dawson—showing scenes of a Bavarian artillery regiment, trench life in the Argonnes, and the occupation of Belgium—did not even reach the American theaters. There were simply handed over to James Archibald, a close friend of the Austrian ambassador, who used them for his lectures on the war. After the incorporation of The American Correspondent Film Company, the Austrian authorities returned this favor by giving the firm some footage from the military archives in Vienna. These official pictures were to be cut into Dawson's first feature film: THE BATTLE AND FALL OF PRZEMYSL (A. C. Film Co., 1915).

The capture of Przemysl highlighted the successful Austro-German offensive at the Eastern Front. After an intense bombardment and a rapid exploitation by the infantry, the entire Russian line along the Carpathians was rolled up. Only a few months later, the Russian army was driven out of Poland. Together with John Everets, a film correspondent for the German foreign propaganda bureau (*Zentralstelle für Auslandsdienst*), Dawson attached himself to the Austrian military staff and followed the troops on their march through Galicia. It was, as he said later to a reporter of *The Continental Times,* a harsh and tiresome experience:

> I traveled the entire distance from the Carpathians to Przemysl with the army. It took four weeks. All fared alike; officers and men ate from the same Goulash Cannon, leading exactly the same life and, as often as not, sleeping out in the open. The Russians kept on retreating and retrenching and then we would have to wait for the bringing up of the big guns and it took several days to set them up. But finally, on June 3, I entered the town with the advanced guard after a 16 kilometers march.
>
> The damage done by the Austrian 30.5 mortars and the 42 centimeter German Krupp guns, was stupendous. Nothing could exist within a large area around where those shells dropped. It was a maddening, nerve-rending experience to go through, and having seen and heard such a bombardment, I could easily understand what was told me, that one of the hospitals was full of Russians who had gone mad owing to the noise, excitement and strain.
>
> I was within one and quarter kilometers of the forts and have taken films in which are to be seen, quite distinctly, the effects of the giant shots, the fragments being thrown high into the air. Big shots fell

several times quite near me, and my assistant Everets had a narrow escape. Had any of the big splinters and stones flying about hit me, I would have no further interest in this world.[11]

The hardships of daily life at the front soon forced Dawson to cut down to the bare essentials. His photographic equipment was remarkably simple. "Plate-cameras," he wrote, "I found to be out of the question. A 3¼ by 5½ roll-film camera made most of my photographs. My motion-picture camera I had fitted with a felt-lined case made with straps, so I could strap it on the back of my soldier-helper for short trips. Trunks are too cumbersome, so I carried my reserve stock of motion-picture film wrapped up in my blankets, which were in turn placed in a steamer-rug roll of heavy canvas with a handle attached to it. On long marches, this baggage went in a wagon."[12]

THE BATTLE AND FALL OF PRZEMYSL, Dawson's four-reel feature, was released by The American Correspondent Film Company in August 1915. It premiered in New York City for an audience of representatives of the film trade. Since the outbreak of war, American exhibitors had seen their share of so-called actual war films. Scenes of the latest Balkan conflict in 1913 had been revamped in order to keep up with the news. The same applied for pictures of prewar maneuvers and inspections. Most of the American photographers, such as Edwin Weigle of *The Chicago Tribune,* had so far been denied permission to film the German side of the war. With its stamp of authenticity, however, Dawson's film was hailed as a first-class production. Wrote *The Billboard*: "It was generally agreed by those present that the films were the most remarkable of the many battle pictures so far shown in this country."[13]

Although most of the footage in Dawson's film appears to have been taken behind the front lines, it showed some amazing aspects of warfare: Austrian brigade headquarters are seen being hit by a Russian shell; a pilot takes off in his plane to locate the enemy's battery; high above Przemysl, the artillery's position is marked on a map and the

Figure 3. Albert Dawson in camp before Przemysl, May 1915. From The Camera Man.

guns are finally destroyed.[14] Such a clear-cut sequence is rather exceptional for a World War I film, since scenes were often edited without much attention to continuity. Dawson's film pictured the Austrian soldiers cheerfully enjoying camp before Przemysl. Then, in Part 3, the siege guns are put into action while a group of machine-gunners move forward into the fight. As a climax, soldiers are seen rushing up the heights around the river San in their attempt to storm the forts of Przemysl. According to Edward Lyell Fox, Dawson nearly lost his life while filming this scene. Some may have had their doubts as to its authenticity, but the trade paper *Variety* was strongly impressed. "It is so well photographed," explained a reviewer, "that one might for a minute suspect it was staged for the benefit of the camera, but this is overshadowed when one sees the dying kicks of one poor devil who fell as his comrades stroke into the rain of bullets. The manner in which he falls and his dying convulsions are enough to convince the most sceptical."[15]

As a pilot movie, THE BATTLE AND FALL OF PRZEMYSL was expected to pave the way for a different sort of production—the educational film. From the health resorts of Germany, Edward L. Fox extolled the virtues of Teutonic country life in BAD EMS/BADEN-BADEN (A.C. Film Co., 1915). Another example was SYSTEM, SECRET OF SUCCESS (A.C. Film Co., 1915), showing—as one trade paper remarked—"the culture, the thrift, the riches and the preparedness of the great German Empire."[16] Judging from a synopsis, the message was brought home with subjects such as a liquid-fire gun in action; the public markets of Hamburg and Dortmund; a close-up of Karl Helffrich, the treasurer of Germany; Albert Dawson, interviewing the United States ambassador in Berlin; and—almost unbelievably—"the agricultural activity which converted Belgium into one great farmland [sic]."[17]

Dawson's work at the Eastern Front came to a close after the fall of Warsaw. The Central Powers were already shifting their operations to the Balkans, and on 6 October 1915, the Austro-German armies swept across the Danube, driving the Serbian troops south into Albania. Following the advance, Dawson first visited Belgrade shortly after its occupation, and then went to Sofia by way of Romania. The Bulgarians, having taken sides with Germany, supplied Dawson with a wagon to carry his film equipment. But as he found out, he had to rely entirely upon his feet to reach the front in time. Said Dawson:

> I cut through the old tracks, always arriving long ahead of the wagon. It was a terrible hard life, as there were no places under cover fit to sleep in. The whole country was simply crawling with lice and vermin. I had to sacrifice all my underclothes.
>
> From Prisrend there is a fine road to Albania, and that had been used by the [Serbian] king and his army. At the end of that road, a strange and weird sight met my eyes. The road is just cut into the side of the mountains and there is a rushing stream way below. So, when they reached the point where the road ceased, they just set their automobiles running at full speed, jumped off them and let them take a big leap over the side into the gorge below. And there they lay, hundreds of them burnt to ashes. There, too, a pathetic sight, was the old-fashioned royal coach of King Peter, a queer ramshackle specimen of the coachman's art in bygone times.[18]

A more striking illustration of Allied defeat in the Balkans would have been hard to fine. Despite the inconveniences he had gone through, Dawson was able to obtain some interesting films which—he said—were highly appreciated by the Bulgarian tsar. His pictures, however, were probably never released in the United States. By the time he had returned to Berlin, The American Correspondent Film Company was teetering on the edge of bankruptcy. A low supply of front-line footage and high expenditures had combined to turn the German film campaign into a financial disaster. In May 1916, the company was officially dissolved.[19]

After a thorough examination by the German authorities, Dawson returned to Stamford where he joined forces with his partner, Brown. Following the American entry into the war, he staged a remarkable comeback as a captain in charge of the U.S. Signal Corps photographic laboratory. All seemed to be well in 1918. But it wasn't.

As it turned out, Felix Malitz, general manager of The American Correspondent Film Company, had gone one step too far in his business transactions with the Germans. This in turn proved to be fatal for Dawson's career. His company's connections with the German Information Service were by then no longer a secret. It wasn't, however, a criminal offense to make movies at the German front—even though the pro-Allied press made it appear so. What was illegal concerned Malitz's shipping of contraband to Germany in 1916. The United States was still neutral at the time, but under pressure from the British navy, no essential goods could be exported directly to Germany. As a result, Malitz was accused of smuggling rubber to the European continent. The charge was, in fact, controversial. But in 1918, Judge Manton considered it a clear case and denounced Malitz as a "counterfeit citizen."[20] Felix Malitz was convicted in the Federal Court of Brooklyn, New York, and sentenced to jail for two years.

In the proceedings of his case, Albert Dawson's name was dragged in. The district attorney made it clear that

there were no charges against him because of his work for The American Correspondent Film Company. Appearing before court a few weeks later, Dawson confirmed his innocence. As was written by the *New York Times,* "He asserted that he found in 1915 that Germany was not friendly to this country and he resigned his position and returned home."[21]

Nevertheless, Dawson's superiors had no scruples about using a "technical charge" in order to have him court-martialed. Shortly after his name was mentioned in the Malitz case, the U.S. Army made a short announcement saying he had been accused of embezzling photographic supplies.[22] On 29 March 1918, Dawson was dismissed. Trapped in a cross fire of investigations and slander, he had finally become a victim of his own work.

Dawson's arrest gives a final, ironic twist to this account. Trying to bounce back into photography, he later worked with a new partner, Charles d'Emery, and renamed his firm The Publishers Photo Service. But things were no longer the same. In 1922, he left for New York City to start a new life. As a tourist guide for Thomas Cooke, Dawson continued to travel around the world. Embittered by his wartime experiences, he never took up the camera again. Albert Dawson died in Washington, D.C., around 1965. ●

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NOTES

1. *Stamford Daily Advocate,* 19 November 1914, p. 3.
2. Letter from August Schultheis to author, 14 December 1988.
3. *The Vincennes Capital,* 12 October 1903, p. 37.
4. Francis A. Collins, *The Camera Man* (New York: The Century Co., 1916), 50-56. This book is dedicated, "To my friend Albert K. Dawson."
5. *The Vincennes Western Sun,* 15 May 1914, p. 6.
6. *The Vincennes Western Sun,* 27 November 1914, p. 6.
7. U.S. Congress, Senate, *Investigation into Brewing and Liquor Interests and German Propaganda,* Vol. 2 (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1919), 1460. Hereafter given as *IBLI.*
8. Edward L. Fox, *Behind the Scenes in Warring Germany* (New York: McBridge, Nast & Co., 1915), 182-191.
9. *Stamford Daily Advocate,* 6 February 1915, p. 1. Dawson visited the Arras front line together with Robert Dunn, a reporter for the *New York Post,* and John Reed, the well-known writer of *Ten Days That Shook The World.*
10. *IBLI,* Vol. 2, p. 1435.
11. *Stamford Daily Advocate,* 2 August 1915, p. 2.
12. Albert K. Dawson, "Photographing on the Firing-Line," *Photo-Era* (May 1917):234.
13. *The Billboard,* 21 August 1915, p. 63.
14. Edward L. Fox, *Descriptive Complete Report of The Battle and Fall of Przemysl* (New York: A.C. Film Co., 1915), 12-13.
15. Review, THE BATTLE AND FALL OF PRZEMYSL, *Variety* (6 August 1915):33.
16. *The Billboard,* 11 September 1915, p. 54.
17. Synopsis SYSTEM, SECRET OF SUCCESS by Felix Malitz. Courtesy of The Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
18. *The Stamford Daily Advocate,* 24 March 1916, pp. 1-2.
19. In November 1915, the A.C. Film Co. released THE BATTLES OF A NATION. A follow-up of THE BATTLE AND FALL OF PRZEMYSL, the movie showed as a highlight the bombardment of Warsaw. Front-line footage had already become scarce; the first two reels in the picture were mostly given over to German propaganda, showing the Empire's food supplies and munition factories. See Reviews, *Motion Picture News,* 4 December 1915, p. 95; *The Billboard,* 27 November 1915, p. 53; *Variety,* 28 November 1915, p. 41.
20. *Moving Picture World,* 25 May 1918, p. 1123.
21. *New York Times,* 3 May 1918, p. 7.
22. *New York Times,* 1 March 1918, p. 5.